

FROM THE BOOKSHELF #171  
ROGER LYONS

DECEMBER 14, 1976

THE SHEPHERD BY FREDERICK FORSYTH  
(A CHRISTMAS STORY)

ANNCR: THE VOICE OF AMERICA BRINGS YOU ANOTHER IN THE WEEKLY SERIES ... FROM THE BOOKSHELF ... IN WHICH WE DISCUSS BOOKS AMERICANS ARE CURRENTLY READING. TODAY ... A CHRISTMAS STORY BY FREDERICK FORSYTH THE SHEPHERD PUBLISHED BY VIKING PRESS. VOA'S BOOK EDITOR, ROGER LYONS, HAS THIS REPORT.

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EDITOR: FREDERICK FORSYTH IS THE AUTHOR OF THREE INTERNATIONAL BEST-SELLERS. PERHAPS THE BEST-KNOWN IS THE DAY OF THE JACKAL, A HAIR-RAISING STORY ABOUT A FICTIONAL ATTEMPT ON THE LIFE OF CHARLES DE GAULLE. FOR THAT NOVEL FORSYTH DREW ON HIS JOURNALISTIC BACKGROUND. NOT SO WELL KNOWN IS THE FACT THAT AT NINETEEN FORSYTH WAS THE YOUNGEST FIGHTER PILOT IN THE ROYAL AIR FORCE. AND NOW, IT IS HIS CAREER IN THE R.A.F. THAT PROVIDES THE ABUNDANCE OF REALISTIC DETAIL IN THIS LATEST NOVELETTE, THE SHEPHERD.

IT IS CHRISTMAS EVE 1957 -- A FLEDGLING R.A.F. PILOT, STATIONED AT A TINY AIRPORT IN NORTHERN GERMANY, IS AT THE CONTROLS OF HIS VAMPIRE JET ON THE SHORT, ROUTINE FLIGHT TO LAKENHEATH AIRPORT, NOT FAR FROM HOME IN THE LONDON SUBURBS. WITH HIS MIND ON THE HOLIDAY LEAVE AHEAD, HE HASN'T THE SLIGHTEST HINT OF IMPENDING DISASTER.

VOICE: IT WAS WARM AND SNUG INSIDE THE COCKPIT...LIKE A COCOON, SMALL AND WARM AND SAFE, SHIELDING ME FROM THE BITTER COLD OUTSIDE, FROM THE FREEZING NIGHT THAT CAN KILL A MAN INSIDE A MINUTE IF HE IS EXPOSED TO IT AT SIX HUNDRED MILES AN HOUR.

EDITOR: THE PROBLEM STARTS TEN MINUTES OUT OVER THE NORTH SEA AS HE NOTICES THE HUM IN HIS HEADPHONES HAS CEASED AND THE COMPASS NEEDLE IS "DRIFTING LAZILY AROUND THE CLOCK, PASSING THROUGH EAST, WEST, SOUTH AND NORTH WITH TOTAL IMPARTIALITY." THE PLANE'S ENTIRE ELECTRICAL SYSTEM HAS BLOWN. WITH NO RADIO, ONLY ENOUGH FUEL FOR FIFTEEN MINUTES BEYOND HIS DESTINATION, THE FOG ROLLING IN AND BAIL-OUT INTO THE FREEZING SEA AS SURE A DEATH AS GOING DOWN WITH PLANE, IT SEEMS CERTAIN THAT THIS IS THE PILOT'S LAST CHRISTMAS EVE.

BEFORE THIS MOMENT, THE LONELINESS OF THE SKY WAS CANCELLED OUT BY THE KNOWLEDGE THAT THE TAP OF A BUTTON COULD BRING THE PILOT IN TOUCH WITH OTHER HUMAN BEINGS, A WHOLE NETWORK OF PEOPLE WHO CARED ABOUT HIM AND COULD BRING HIM HELP. BUT NOW, THAT POSSIBILITY IS GONE.

VOICE: ALL THOSE THINGS THAT HAD SEEMED SO BEAUTIFUL AS I CLIMBED AWAY FROM THE AIRFIELD IN LOWER SAXONY, NOW SEEMED MY WORST ENEMIES. THE STARS WERE NO LONGER IMPRESSIVE IN THEIR BRILLIANCE; I THOUGHT OF THEIR HOSTILITY, SPARKLING AWAY THERE IN THE TIMELESS, LOST INFINITIES OF ENDLESS SUB-ZERO SPACE. THE NIGHT SKY, ITS STRATOSPHERIC TEMPERATURE FIXED, NIGHT AND DAY ALIKE, AT AN UNCHANGING FIFTY-SIX DEGREES BELOW ZERO, BECAME IN MY MIND A LIMITLESS PRISON, CREAKING WITH COLD. BELOW ME LAY THE WORST OF THEM ALL, THE HEAVY BRUTALITY OF THE NORTH SEA, WAITING TO SWALLOW UP ME AND MY PLANE AND BURY US FOR ENDLESS ETERNITY IN A LIQUID CRYPT WHERE NOTHING MOVED, NOR WOULD EVER MOVE AGAIN. AND NO ONE WOULD EVER KNOW. /

EDITOR: ALL HE HAS LEFT ARE HIS PRESSURE-OPERATED INSTRUMENTS -- HIS AIR-SPEED INDICATORS, ALTIMETER AND VERTICAL SPEED INDICATOR. IN OTHER WORDS, HE KNOWS HOW FAST HE IS GOING, HOW HIGH AND WHETHER HE IS DIVING OR CLIMBING. IN HIS EXTREMITY, TO HOLD BACK THE THREATENING PANIC, HE BEGINS AN IMAGINERY DISCUSSION WITH HIS FORMER FLIGHT INSTRUCTOR. TO CONSERVE GAS, HE REDUCES HIS SPEED TO A MINIMUM. BECAUSE OF THE POSSIBILITY OF A CRASH THAT WILL ENDANGER LIVES, HE MUST KEEP AWAY FROM HUMAN HABITATION. THEN HE REMEMBERS HIS INSTRUCTOR'S WORDS OF WHAT CAN BE DONE AS A LAST RESORT.

VOICE: WE MOVE OUT TO SEA THEN, FLYING IN SMALL TRIANGLES, TURNING LEFT, LEFT AND LEFT AGAIN, EACH LEG OF THE TRIANGLE BEING OF TWO MINUTES DURATION FLYING TIME. IN THIS WAY WE HOPE TO ATTRACT THE ATTENTION OF OUR RADIO SCANNERS.

EDITOR: THE PILOT PRAYS FERVENTLY AS HE BEGINS ONE LEG, THEN THE SECOND. ON THE FINAL LEG HE SEES IT -- DOWN BELOW THE WING TIP, AGAINST THE WHITE SHEET OF THE FOG BANK LIT BY THE MOON. THE BLACK SHADOW OF ANOTHER AIRCRAFT, CROSSING THE WHITENESS, KEEPS PACE WITH THE VAMPIRE. SUCH A RESCUE AIRCRAFT, WHEN IT MATERIALIZES UNDER THESE CONDITIONS, IS KNOWN AS "THE SHEPHERD." THIS ONE, AN OBSOLETE FIGHTER BOMBER OF WORLD WAR TWO VINTAGE, HAS THE LETTERS J.K. WRITTEN ON IT. BY MEANS OF A SERIES OF MANEUVERS AND GESTURES FROM HIS RESCUER, THE PILOT, WITH THE FUEL GAUGE ON EMPTY, MIRACULOUSLY IS ABLE TO LAND ON AN ABANDONED AIRFIELD, NOW AN AIR FORCE SUPPLY DEPOT. BUT NO ONE CAN IDENTIFY THE RESCUE AIRCRAFT WHICH BY NOW HAS FLOWN AWAY INTO THE DARKNESS.

EDITOR: IN THE ROOM WHERE HE IS PREPARING TO RETIRE, HE SEES A  
(CONT'D) PHOTOGRAPH OF A PILOT, ABOUT HIS OWN AGE, IN HIS EARLY  
TWENTIES, IN FULL R.A.F. FLYING GEAR, STANDING IN FRONT  
OF A PLANE WHICH IS THE EXACT REPLICA OF THE ONE WHICH HAS  
RESCUED HIM. HE CAN SEE THE LETTERS J.K. CLEARLY WRITTEN  
ON THE FUSELAGE. FROM THE MESS STEWARD, AN OLD MAN WHO  
SERVED IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR, THE PILOT LEARNS THAT THESE  
ARE THE INITIALS OF JOHN KAVANAUGH, AN AVIATOR IN THE HABIT  
OF GOING OUT TO FIND SOME CRIPPLED BOMBER MAKING ITS WAY  
OVER THE NORTH SEA IN ORDER TO GUIDE IT HOME.

VOICE: "WELL," I SAID, "BY THE LOOK OF IT, HE'S STILL DOING IT."

NOW JOE SMILED.

"OH, I HARDLY THINK SO, SIR. MR. JOHNNY WENT OUT ON HIS  
LAST PATROL ON CHRISTMAS EVE 1943, JUST FOURTEEN YEARS  
AGO TONIGHT. HE NEVER CAME BACK, SIR. HE WENT DOWN WITH  
HIS PLANE SOMEWHERE OUT THERE IN THE NORTH SEA. GOOD  
NIGHT, SIR. AND HAPPY CHRISTMAS."

EDITOR: THE SHEPHERD IS A GEM OF A STORY WRITTEN WITH A SENSITIVITY  
AND BEAUTY ONE WOULD HARDLY EXPECT OF AN AUTHOR WHOSE  
REPUTATION WAS BUILT ON STORIES OF WAR AND CRIME. WITH THE  
MAGNIFICENT AND HAUNTING BLACK AND WHITE DRAWINGS OF LOU  
FECK, WHICH TAKE UP MORE THAN HALF OF THE BOOK'S ONE  
HUNDRED AND TWENTY-THREE PAGES, IT SHOULD RIVAL IN APPEAL  
THAT SENSATIONAL SUCCESS OF 1972 JOHN LIVINGSTON SEAGULL.  
CERTAINLY, IT IS A MORE MATURE BOOK OF THE HIGHEST LITERARY  
EXCELLENCE. /

EDITOR: THE SHEPHERD WAS ORIGINALLY WRITTEN AS A CHRISTMAS PRESENT  
(CONT'D) FOR THE AUTHOR'S WIFE, CAROLE, IN 1974.

ANNCR: YOU HAVE BEEN LISTENING TO A REPORT OF FEDERICK FORSYTH'S  
NEW CHRISTMAS NOVEL, THE SHEPHERD. LISTEN NEXT WEEK (AT  
THIS TIME) FOR ANOTHER DISCUSSION OF A BOOK AMERICANS ARE  
CHOOSING ... FROM THE BOOKSHELF.

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